

THE DATE OF THE BUDDHA RECONSIDERED

The date of the Buddha's Nirvāṇa is supposed to be fairly certain. In all hand-books of Indian history, world history, history of religions etc. we find statements like the relevant sentence in the *Cambridge History of India*: « There is now a general agreement among scholars that Buddha died within a few years of 480 B.C. »¹. If this date is correct, it is the earliest, rather accurately known date in Indian history.

It must be mentioned, however, that Prof. Lamotte does not agree with this communis opinio in his *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*. He says: « Selon une tradition unanime le Bouddha vécut quatre-vingts ans, mais la date de son Nirvāṇa, c'est-à-dire de sa mort, n'est pas encore établie avec certitude... Deux chronologies sont attestées dans les anciens documents: la chronologie longue qui place le Nirvāṇa 218 ans avant le sacre d'Aśoka (c. 486 a.C.), la chronologie courte qui situe le même événement 100 ans avant le sacre (c. 368 a.C.)... L'historien moderne peut opter indifféremment pour la chronologie longue ou la chronologie courte... »².

The so-called short chronology is attested by Indian sources and their Chinese and Tibetan translations, while the so-called long chronology is based on the testimony of the Sinhalese chronicles. Henceforth, I shall call them the Indian and the Ceylonese chronology respectively. There is no dispute any more among scholars that the tradition of the so-called « dotted record » known from Chinese sources originated from Sri Lanka and, therefore, it can not be considered an independent source³. A few, rather late, sources refer to other dates of the Nirvāṇa, e.g. 116 years before Aśoka's anointment, i.e. 384 B.C., or 565 B.C., 665

1. JARL CHARPENTIER, *The history of the Jains*, in « The Cambridge History of India », vol. 1, Cambridge, 1922, p. 156.

2. ÉTIENNE LAMOTTE, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*, Louvain, 1959, pp. 13-5.

3. See below and ANDRÉ BAREAU, *La date du Nirvāṇa*, in « Journal asiatique », 241 (1953), p. 53.

B.C., 865 B.C., 955 B.C., 1247 B.C. etc. up to 2100 B.C.⁴. We can safely ignore these late traditions for our deliberations.

The best survey of the arguments which led scholars into the belief that the calculation of the date of the Nirvāṇa must be based on the Ceylonese chronology is found in the contribution *La date du Nirvāṇa* by André Bareau in *Journal asiatique*, vol. 241 (1953), pp. 27-62. We must, however, keep in mind that the date of the Nirvāṇa as calculated by the Ceylonese chronology is by no means 480, 478 or 486 B.C., but it is 544 or 543 B.C. It is well known that the date of Aśoka is miscalculated in Ceylonese chronology, and that the miscalculation of about 62-70 years has to be corrected if we want to use this chronology for the calculation of the date of the Nirvāṇa. The resulting modern chronology based on the corrected date of Aśoka is henceforth called the « corrected Ceylonese chronology ». As far as the miscalculation of Aśoka's date in the Ceylonese chronicles is concerned, Prof. Bareau asserts that « *cette différence importe peu pour nos calculs* »⁵. I shall now summarize the main arguments which have been presented to support the reliability of the corrected Ceylonese chronology:

(1) In all recensions of the *Vinayaṭīkā*, 100 (or 110) p.N. is given as the date of the Council of Vaiśālī which was held before the reign of Dharmāśoka. Therefore, the Indian chronology which places Dharmāśoka's coronation in 100 p.N. must be erroneous⁶.

(2) The so-called *History of Khotan*⁷ places the reign of Dharmāśoka in 234 p.N. which is not too different from the Ceylonese date (218 p.N.).

(3) The list of the Indian kings found in the Ceylonese records is partly in agreement with the lists of kings as found in the Purāṇas and the Jaina sources. Though there are considerable discrepancies in details, these similarities supposedly attest to the trustworthiness of the Ceylonese tradition⁸.

(4) Mahāvīra is known to have been a contemporary of the Buddha. The date of the Nirvāṇa of Mahāvīra, as calculated by Hermann Jacobi and Jarl Charpentier on the basis of the chronological information found in Hemacandra's works, is 468 B.C. This would well fit in with the corrected Ceylonese chronology of the Buddha's Nirvāṇa⁹.

(5) Some scholars also quote the « dotted record » as an additional argument in favour of the Ceylonese chronology, but Prof. Bareau

4. See BAREAU, *loc. cit.*, pp. 46 f., 52.

5. BAREAU, *loc. cit.*, p. 52.

6. BAREAU, *loc. cit.*, pp. 27-9.

7. See BAREAU, *loc. cit.*, p. 51.

8. Cf. BAREAU, *loc. cit.*, pp. 31-6, 60 f.

9. BAREAU, *loc. cit.*, pp. 53-6.

rightly comments that « comme l'a reconnu Takakusu, que cette tradition est probablement originaire de Ceylan », and therefore it is no independent source¹⁰.

(6) The Tibetan historian Sureśamatibhadra mentions the existence of a tradition placing the Nirvāṇa in 545 B.C. in a 15th century Tibetan work, i.e. a date nearly identical with the Ceylonese chronology. Bareau has commented that we do not know the basis of this chronological calculation¹¹, but I am rather convinced that it was taken over from Ceylon at the same time with the Pāli works which have been translated into Tibetan and included in the Kanjur¹². Thus, this tradition, too, is no independent source, but it is very likely that it represents the second, so far unknown source of Tāranāthas calculations¹³.

(7) Bhavya records 137 p.N. as the date of the first great schism according to the tradition of the Sammitiya. If we add 69 years for the reigns of Mahāpadma, Candragupta and Bindusāra, we arrive at 206 p.N. for Dharmāsoka which is not very far away from the date as recorded in the Ceylonese tradition¹⁴. However, there are too many unproved presuppositions in this argument to make it convincing.

(8) The *Sāriputrapariṣcchā*, a text of the Mahāsāṅghika school, dates the first internal schism within this school in the second century p.N. It places, however, the persecution of the Buddhists by Puṣyamitra before the first schism. If we accept 140 p.N. for the first schism which must be placed before Aśoka, and disregard the evident confusion of the text, we arrive at a date before 400 B.C. for the Nirvāṇa¹⁵. This is the most far-fetched of all the arguments and hardly worth of any further discussion.

(9) Fleet and others have tried to date the Nirvāṇa with the help of astronomical calculations. It is sufficient to refer here to Bareau's critical remarks on these extremely unreliable argumentations¹⁶.

A number of other difficulties and contradictions arising from the assumption that the corrected Ceylonese chronology is reliable has already been discussed by the defenders of this chronology:

(1) The first difficulty arises from the afore-mentioned miscalculation of Aśoka's reign in the Ceylonese chronicles. Modern authors have proposed different explanations for this miscalculation. European scholars

10. BAREAU, loc. cit., p. 53.

11. BAREAU, loc. cit., p. 52.

12. For these texts, see HEINZ BECHERT, *A note on Pali Buddhist texts in Tibetan translation* (in preparation).

13. See BAREAU, loc. cit., p. 49.

14. BAREAU, loc. cit., p. 37 f.

15. BAREAU, loc. cit., p. 38 f.

16. BAREAU, loc. cit., p. 56.

still largely make use of Wilhelm Geiger's chronology, where the miscalculation is considered as belonging to a rather late period in Ceylonese history, but it seems to me that Senerat Paranavitana, G.C. Mendis and other scholars from Sri Lanka are correct in their refutation of Geiger's views. The error, therefore, is to be found in the calculation of the dates of the kings between Devānāmpiya Tissa and Duṭṭhagāmaṇī, and not later¹⁷. T.W. Rhys Davids has already formulated the consequence: « *If the date for Asoka is placed too early in the Ceylon chronicles, can we still trust the 218 years which they allege to have elapsed from the commencement of the Buddhist era down to the time of Asoka?... Of the answer to this question, there can I think, be no doubt. We can not* »¹⁸.

(2) There are lists of so-called patriarchs handed down in early Buddhist traditions. It has been observed by many scholars that these lists are characterized by « *the uncommonly long duration of the lives of the earliest patriarchs according to these accounts* »¹⁹. The defenders of the corrected Ceylonese chronology, therefore, have to explain why the lists of the patriarchs do not conform with their chronology, and this in spite of the fact that the lists of the patriarchs in all three available main traditions confront us with the same problem. These three traditions, viz. those of the Theravāda or Pāli school, the Sarvāstivādin and of the Mūlasarvāstivādin, are clearly independent of each other²⁰.

(3) It is well known that the Ceylonese sources are not in complete agreement amongst themselves. We find traces of at least three different chronological systems in the two chronicles. In any case, it seems that the now accepted Ceylonese chronology i.e. the Theravāda tradition placing the Nirvāṇa in 544/543 B.C. is the result of a particular redaction of the historiographical tradition²¹.

17. See G. C. MENDIS, *The Chronology of the early Pāli chronicles*, in « *University of Ceylon Review* », 5 (1947), no. 1, pp. 39-54. The corrected chronology of the Ceylonese kings is followed in all more recent publications from Sri Lanka, e.g. « *University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon* », vol. 1, ed. H. C. Ray, Colombo, 1960, pp. 843-47. The date of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī is, therefore, 161-137 B.C., and not 101-77 B.C. as calculated by Wilhelm Geiger.

18. T. W. RHYSDAVIDS, *The early history of the Buddhists*, in « *The Cambridge History of India* », loc. cit., p. 171.

19. ERICH FRAUWALLNER, *The earliest Vinaya and the beginnings of Buddhist literature*, Roma, 1956, p. 166.

20. Cf. FRAUWALLNER, loc. cit., pp. 56 f., 166-69.

21. Cf. BAREAU, loc. cit., pp. 31-6. Detailed studies of the chronological traditions of the early Ceylonese chronicles were made by Prof. Eggermont, but I could not evaluate the very complicated arguments of his chronological studies yet. It seems, however, that Eggermont's findings are not in conflict with the views expressed in the present paper, and that, by other lines of argumentation, Prof. Eggermont arrives at basically the same results. See P. H. L. EGGERMONT, *New Notes on Asoka and his successors*, part 1-4, in « *Persica, Revue critique et bibliographique internationale pour l'histoire de l'Asie antérieure et les civilisations iraniennes* », 2 (1965/66), 4 (1969), 5 (1970/71) and 8 (1979).

(4) The lists of the Indian kings in the Ceylonese tradition, in the Purāṇas and in the Jaina sources and the chronology of the kings in these traditions show rather substantial disagreement in many points, and the adherents of the corrected Ceylonese chronology had to make use of very complicated and rather artificial arguments in their attempt to work out a coherent chronological system on the basis of these traditions. There is no external evidence to corroborate the results of their rather arbitrary calculations.

In addition to these points, I would like to raise a few more questions which have not been satisfactorily answered yet by the adherents of the corrected Ceylonese chronology:

(1) The tendency to claim high antiquity for the founder of a tradition is common to all periods of Indian — and not only Indian — history. If we suppose that the so-called Ceylonese tradition of Aśoka's coronation in 218 p.N. was already known to them, we must explain why Indian Buddhists should have invented a chronology which places the Buddha's Nirvāṇa much later.

(2) Whoever has worked with Buddhist church history, must be aware of the high importance of the *upasampadā* lineages on which the legitimation of the Sangha is based. At the same time, all students of Indian history should know that chronological information is usually unreliable in Indian tradition. Furthermore, the names of the patriarchs are listed in the canonical text of the Vinaya, but not the dates. Therefore, it is much more likely that the names in the lists of the patriarchs are quite correct, but the dates attributed to them are not. This conclusion is further corroborated by the fact that the historicity of several of the patriarchs is attested by independent sources, e.g. that of Sāṇavāsī or Saṇika in the report of the Council of Vaiśālī, that of Madhyāntika by the report on the missionaries sent out by Aśoka etc.

(3) Whereas the adherents of the corrected Ceylonese chronology claim that the list of the patriarchs is incomplete, though it forms part of the canonical tradition, they put great emphasis on the value of the list of the kings as handed down in much later Buddhist sources. It seems to me, however, that the list of the patriarchs was much more important for the early Buddhist Sangha than that of the kings, particularly in view of the fact that Buddhism spread in several independent kingdoms during the pre-Maurya era.

(4) The adherents of the corrected Ceylonese chronology argue that the Indian chronology is very suspicious because 100 years p.N. looks like an invented round figure, but, at the same time, they accept the reliability of the date of the Council of Vaiśālī at 100 p.N., though 100 is a round figure in this case as well. It seems to me, however, that the date 100 p.N. for the Council of Vaiśālī has no historical value at all.

The fact that it is common to all Vinaya versions is no argument in its favour, because all Vinaya versions are derived from one and the same original source. Here, the word « 100 » is used to denote an indefinite rather lengthy period of time.

(5) The argument that the corrected Ceylonese chronology is confirmed by Jaina chronology does not stand a critical examination. The traditional date of the Nirvāṇa of Mahāvīra is 528 B.C. in Śvetāmbara and 510 B.C. in Digambara tradition. We meet with the same type of inaccuracies in early Jaina chronology which we already know from early Ceylonese Buddhist chronology. Jaina chronology had to be corrected on the basis of the historical date of Aśoka. But even for this corrected Jaina chronology, the list of the Theras is too short. Hermann Jacobi, in the introduction to his edition of the *Sthavirāvalīcarita* or *Paṇḍita-parvan* by Hemacandra says that « *there must have been far more theras than are contained in the Therāvalī* »²². Jacobi notes the « *confusion prevailing in their system of chronology* ». Therefore, he constructed his corrected Jaina chronology on the basis of a number of rather complicated, but also quite tentative conclusions. Which then is the main argument in favour of this particular Jaina chronology which remained only one of several different attempts to correct the evident « *confusion* » in the chronology of the Jainas? To quote Bareau again, « *l'argument le plus décisif en sa faveur est son accord avec certaines traditions bouddhiques, notamment avec la tradition singhalaise* »²³. Bareau has rightly concluded that, therefore, it is impossible to use this argument for the calculation of the date of the Nirvāṇa of the Buddha²⁴.

(6) Buddhism at the time of Aśoka does not seem to have been very different from Buddhism immediately after the Buddha's Nirvāṇa. Dissension and diversification within the Sangha seems to have been limited to minor points of the Vinaya. It is very unlikely that Buddhism should have been so static during a period of more than 200 years, if we compare the rapid speed of later developments in Indian Buddhism, but also compared with the development of other religious traditions.

Therefore, the conclusion seems stringent that there is no substantial evidence at all in favour of the corrected Ceylonese chronology, but there are many arguments which point at a later date of the Nirvāṇa.

Naturally one would ask how the Ceylonese chronology has originated. I think I can answer this question. The Ceylonese chronology is accurate from king Duṭṭhagāmaṇī onwards and beginning with that

22. 2nd edition, Calcutta, 1932 (« *Bibliotheca Indica* », 96), p. XVIII. I owe this reference to Dr. Gustav Roth. The Nirvāṇa of Mahāvīra is calculated as ca. 467 B.C. on the basis of the assumption that the year 477 B.C. as the date of Buddha's Nirvāṇa has « *been proved to be correct between very narrow limits* » by HERRMANN JACOBI, *The Kāpasūtra of Bhadrabāhu*, Leipzig, 1879, introduction, pp. 6-10.

23. BAREAU, loc. cit., p. 56.

24. BAREAU, loc. cit., p. 56.

period the Ceylonese chronicles can be considered as highly reliable sources of historical information. I have shown elsewhere, viz. in my *Zum Ursprung der Geschichtsschreibung im indischen Kulturbereich*²⁵, that historiography was initiated in Ceylon at that particular period. Information on earlier history was derived from oral tradition, and the chronological calculations were based on rough estimates made by the authors of the earliest Ceylonese historiography which underlies the now existing sources. This opinion was already formulated by Prof. G. C. Mendis who was one of the foremost historian of Sri Lanka²⁶. In accordance with the political aim of this historiography, a synchronism was constructed between Vijaya, the mythic forefather of the Sinhalese, and the Nirvāṇa of the Buddha in order to serve for the legitimization of the claim of the Sinhalese to be the Buddha's elected people²⁷. By the way the Vijaya-Buddha synchronism is not the only construction of Sinhala mythology which has mislead scholars into the belief that it represents reliable historical information. The second case is the famous «Gajabāhu Synchronism», which, for a long time, has served as the basis for early Tamil chronology. As Prof. Gananath Obeyesekere has clearly shown²⁸, this synchronism is a purely mythological construction without any historical foundation. The third example refers to the date of Kālidāsa. As it is well-known, the tale of the contemporaneity of Kālidāsa and Kumāradāsa alias Kumāradhātusena has been used by many scholars to assign a rather exact date to Kālidāsa. Now we have come to know that Kumāradāsa, the author of the Jānakīharaṇa, lived several centuries later than king Kumāradhātusena and that this tale is of much more recent origin²⁹.

If the Ceylonese chronology cannot serve as a basis for the calculation of the date of the Nirvāṇa, the question remains, whether the Indian chronology should be accepted. No doubt, 100 years p.N. seems suspicious as a round figure. On the other hand, it is not impossible that Aśoka decided to undergo his coronation after his conversion to Buddhism at the auspicious occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Nirvāṇa which happened to fall within this period of time. So far,

25. «Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen», 1969, Nr. 2. A revised English version of the contribution is HEINZ BECHERT, *The beginnings of Buddhist historiography: Mahāvamsa and political thinking*, in «Religion and legitimization of power in Sri Lanka», ed. Bardwell L. Smith, Chambersburg PA, 1978, pp. 1-12.

26. G. C. MENDIS, loc. cit., pp. 42 f.

27. For the political and didactic aim of the early historiography of Ceylon, see BECHERT, *The beginnings of Buddhist historiography: Mahāvamsa and political thinking*, loc. cit., pp. 6-10.

28. GANANATH OBEYESEKERE, *Gajabahu and the Gajabahu Synchronism*, in «The Ceylon Journal of the Humanities», 1 (1970), pp. 25-6. See also H. BECHERT, *Mythologie der singhalesischen Volksreligion*, in «Wörterbuch der Mythologie», ed. H. W. Haussig, I. Abt., Lieferung 15, pp. 581, 624-27.

29. *The Jānakīharaṇa of Kumāradāsa*, ed. S. Paranavitana and C. E. Godakumbura, Colombo, 1967, introduction, pp. LI-LXXII. The old story is still reproduced in W. RUBEN, *Kālidāsa, Die menschliche Bedeutung seiner Werke*, Berlin, 1956, p. 12.

we have no means to prove or to disprove this suggestion. It seems to me that too many details of the chronology of Aśoka's reign are still open to debate so that any suggestion of this kind may be premature.

However, we may roughly calculate the date of the Nirvāṇa on the basis of the lists of patriarchs. Without going into more details here, I may be permitted to say that, according to my calculations, the Buddha's Nirvāṇa should be dated between about 85 to 105 years before Aśoka's coronation, i.e. about 30 to 50 years before Alexander's Indian campaign. The Council of Vaiśālī may be dated about 40 to 50 p.N. The tradition that Sāṇavāsī, one of the great authorities of this convocation, was a personal pupil of Ānanda, becomes now credible³⁰. We can also recalculate the date of Mahāvīra on the basis of the *sthaviraparamparā* with similar results³¹. Ernst Leumann, one of the greatest scholars in the field of Jaina studies, has rightly observed that « *im allgemeinen verraten die Thera-Listen mit ihren eingeflochtenen kirchengeschichtlichen Notizen eine genaue, sorgfältig geführte Tradition* »³². This statement is valid for the names of the sthaviras, but not, of course, for the number of years attributed to their patriarchates.

Several other questions of early Indian chronology must be reconsidered if my suggestion is accepted, e.g. the question of the chronological relation of the development of early Indian and Greek philosophy and their mutual influence. We also understand why Yonas are mentioned in some seemingly very ancient passages of the Tripitaka.

I should, however, add that careful reading of the works of G. C. Mendis, E. Lamotte and P. H. L. Eggermont which I have quoted in this contribution should already have shown to the world of scholars that the usually accepted chronology of the Buddha does not stand a critical examination. Therefore, my present contribution does not claim to contain a new discovery, but only to remind readers of well-known facts which, unfortunately, are generally being ignored³³.

30. For the chronology of this period cf. also JEAN FILLIOZAT, *La date de l'avènement de Candragupta roi de Magadha (313 avant J.-C.)*, in « Journal des savants », 1978, pp. 175-84.

31. This attempt will be made elsewhere by the present author.

32. ERNST LEUMANN, *Zwei weitere Kālaka-Legenden*, in « Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft », 37 (1883), p. 502.

33. I would like to thank Prof. Eggermont for the encouragement to publish my findings which he gave me on the occasion of the Second Conference of the International Association for Buddhist Studies in Nalanda, January 1980, when I read an extremely short summary of my paper. Finally I should mention that the date of the Buddha as suggested by the present author, viz. ca. 368-370 B.C., was already suggested by one of the earliest Western Indologists, viz. by N. L. Westergaard (N. L. WESTERGAARD, *Ueber den ältesten Zeitraum der indischen Geschichte... [und] Ueber Buddha's Todesjahr...*, Breslau, 1862, pp. 94-128). The original Danish version was published by the Royal Danish Academy in 1860. Dr. E. Pauly of Copenhagen University kindly gave me this information after the presentation of the present paper at the Conference-Seminar of Indological Studies in Stockholm. However, Westergaard's chronological arguments are now outdated, and it is more or less by chance that the date proposed by him in 1860 roughly corresponds to the date proposed in the present paper.